Summary

Expanding leadership capacity across district boundaries: The Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership
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Leadership matters – and there’s no better case for that than the actions the superintendents of the Fresno and Long Beach Unified School Districts have taken to prepare students for success in college and careers. Their strategies are not unique. Many leaders are aware that successful organizations must have clearly defined goals, use data to measure progress toward those goals, adopt appropriate change managements strategies, strengthen the governance team and support the development of other leaders in the system. However, establishing and leveraging their Partnership has allowed these district superintendents to deepen their own leadership practice and to grow and develop the leadership of others throughout their systems.

This second in a series of briefs on the Fresno-Long Beach Learning Partnership draws upon our analysis of data collected over nearly two years, including interviews with key district leaders and several stakeholders outside of the districts, attendance at district meetings, and key district documents. While leadership development – the development of principals, assistant principals and coaches – is one of three core areas of focus for both districts, this brief addresses the ways the Partnership supports the larger leadership strategies employed by both superintendents.

The success of the Partnership rests in its capacity to strengthen key leadership strategies by keeping everyone in the system focused on district goals, sharing resources and best practices across the two systems, creating a broader context for interpreting and comparing data patterns, and learning more deeply about each other’s systems in order to work across their differences. In this brief, we point to two major observations based on our documentation of their work.

1. While the vision and commitments that superintendents Michael Hanson (Fresno) and Chris Steinhauser (Long Beach) share may have provided an initial foundation for the Partnership, the lessons of their collaboration (and thus its potential for similar efforts elsewhere) the Partnership refines and focuses those commitments.
2. The Partnership reinforces leadership strategies by providing:
   a. a forum for ongoing discussion of key indicators of progress toward common goals and
   b. a larger arena for the ongoing learning of mid-level managers.

While these observations reflect the Partnership’s impact within and across Fresno and Long Beach, we also see the potential for cross-district collaboration beyond these two districts. The Partnership has garnered the attention of other practitioners and policymakers, expanding the voice and leadership of these two districts across the state.
Beyond Shared Vision and Commitments
The Fresno-Long Beach Partnership has gained the attention of policymakers and practitioners across California eager to learn from and support new strategies for accelerating the pace of improvement. As they look for lessons from the work of these districts, many attribute the success of the Partnership to the strong professional relationship that has developed between the superintendents. Both superintendents move beyond goals and strategies to infuse their organizations with a sense of moral purpose and direction. Both share a deep moral commitment to equity and access. This moral dimension provides the foundation for all of their work and may be one reason why outsiders are so likely to attribute the success of the Partnership to these two particular leaders.

And yet, while the vision and commitments that Hanson and Steinhauser share may indeed have formed an initial foundation for the Partnership, the lessons of their collaboration go beyond the close ties between these two individual leaders. Sharing a common vision at the superintendent level is neither sufficient nor unique to this Partnership. Despite the significant institutional challenges that both superintendents face to accelerate improvement (such as labor relations and budget constraints), their collaboration offers new opportunities to reinforce and strengthen the exercise of the leadership strategies both believe will prepare students for the widest array of post-secondary options. It provides a larger arena for district learning to expand the perspectives of district leaders and encourage new patterns of thinking. This aspect of the Partnership is essential to its success.

There are a number of challenges that remain. The Partnership has emerged during an unprecedented budget crisis in California. Both superintendents are faced with budget constraints that have required deep cuts throughout their systems. And as they struggle with their fiscal challenges, both are negotiating solutions within the complexities of their different labor contexts. As they navigate these challenges, the Partnership is a resource upon which they can draw.

Reinforcing Leadership Practices
We know that one effective leadership practice is the creation of learning communities that use data to determine what is working and where improvements are needed. In this regard, the Partnership has added value to individual district practices by providing a forum to share data management practices and providing a larger learning community whose members compare data across districts to identify larger patterns in student achievement and promising practices. Quarterly meetings include “deep dives” into student achievement data from both districts. Examining the data together allows leaders to identify patterns beyond individual districts and to discuss strategies for continued improvement.

The Partnership has also helped to strengthen the alignment of resources with district goals by carefully identifying the different parts of the system whose cooperation and collaboration are critical to achieving district goals. Their quarterly meetings often include leaders from other areas such as human resources, information systems, and business services so that the different “silos” are not operating at cross purposes.
And the Partnership has enabled both districts to work more successfully in a resource-challenged environment than they would have been able to do otherwise. For example, Fresno’s Associate Superintendent of Equity and Access is developing a system in collaboration with the University of California’s transcript evaluation service to analyze all student transcripts. Doing so will allow the district to know whether students are on track to graduate with the widest array of college and career options possible. He shared that system for monitoring course-taking patterns with Long Beach, along with a set of case studies that support the need for such systems.

And finally, the Partnership provides opportunities to develop leadership capacity of middle managers within the district. It provides a larger arena for district learning to expand the perspectives of district leaders and encourage new patterns of thinking. This aspect of the Partnership is essential to its success.

**Extending the voice of district leaders across the state**

As it matures, the Partnership’s effects are beginning not only to take root down through the system, but ripple outward to other districts. The recent collaboration among six districts to apply for the second round of Race to the Top funding is an outgrowth of the leaders in the Partnership. We believe their work in the Partnership directly led to their being asked to be part of a consortium of districts willing to take on the challenges of putting forward a second California application for Race to the Top funds. Although they are obviously hoping to secure funding from Race to the Top, even without those funds, this cross-district collaboration looks likely to continue on issues such as teacher evaluation. Together, this larger partnership will take on some of the challenges that teacher and principal evaluations present.

Indeed, as Hanson pointed out, this Partnership may be on the leading edge of a new way to work toward improved outcomes for students. Hanson talked about the benefits he saw early in his tenure in a kind of silent partnership he noticed between Steinhauser and Laura Schwalm in Garden Grove. “It was really Laura’s and Chris’ collaboration that attracted me…I was the guy who was brought in and Chris and Laura were very helpful and supportive of me as a new superintendent. They paid it forward, so that’s what I’m going to try to do as best I can.”